

MISS BRETHERTON

By MRS. HUMPHREY WARD,
AUTHOR OF "ROBERT ELSMERE."

CHAPTER IV.

A few days after the performance of the "White Lady" Kendal, in the course of a walk between us, I had a long and fair detailed account of the evening, including the interview with her after the play, which had left two or three very marked impressions upon him. "I wish," he wrote, "I could only convey to you a sense of her personal charm and beauty, and of the presence of her artistic defects, which I suppose that cannot of mine cannot but leave on you. When I came away that night after our conversation with her, talking to her, looking at her, Forbes' attitude is the only possible and reasonable one. What does art, or cultivation, or training mean? I told him, saying, 'I walk home, in echo of him—so long as nature will only condescend one in a hundred years to produce for us a creature so perfect, so finely fashioned to all beautiful uses! Let other people go through the toll to acquire; their aim is truth; but here is beauty in its quintessence, and with it truth, and with it truth! Beauty is harmony with the universal order, a revelation of laws and perfections of which, in our common groping through a dull world, we find in general nothing to name. And, if so, what folly to ask of a hundred years, when there should be more than beautiful! It is a messenger from the gods, and we treat it as if it were any common traveler along the highway of life, and cross-examine it for its incidental instead of raising our altar and sacrificing to it with grateful hearts.'

"That was his last impression of Friday night. But naturally, by Saturday morning I had returned to the rational point of view. The mind's morning climate is removed by many degrees from that of the evening; and the critical revolt, which the whole spectacle of the 'White Lady' had originally inspired, had now given way to a kind of indifference, to a kind of weariness, to a kind of exhaustion, indeed, to feel as if I and humanity, with its long laborious tradition, were on one side, holding our own against a young and arrogant aggressor—namely, beauty, in the person of Miss Bretherton. How many men and women, I thought, have labored and struggled and died in the effort to bring up the highest expression in one single art, and are they to be cut down, eclipsed in a moment, by something which is a mere freak of nature; something like the furies of the field, has neither moral spirit nor any claim to be called a masterpiece of art? Those who have toiled to me through my feeling in her presence of the night before, as if the sudden overthrow of the critical resistance in me had been a kind of treachery to their cause. Because, though she had found myself in sympathy with some of her ways—but let us withdraw from her sway and a preconceived judgment of her character, let us defend against her the store of human sympathy which is the proper reward, not of her facile and heavenly perfections, but of her frank and intelligent all of that is noblest and tenderest in the workings of the human spirit."

"And then, as my mood cooled still further, I began to recall many an evening at the Francaise with you, and to feel again the strong attraction which seemed to tell me, 'Sir, I realized afresh your dramatic intelligence and dramatic training really are, I fell into an angry contempt for our lavish English enthusiasm. Poor girl! it is not her fault if she believes herself to be a great actress. Born up in your mother's teaching and training, and without any but the most elementary education, yet she is to know what the real thing means! She finds herself the rage within a few weeks of her appearance in the greatest city in the world. Nature has given you no need for her critics—why should she?'

"And she is indeed a most perplexing mixture. Do what I will, I cannot harmonize all my different impressions of her. Let me begin again. Why is it that her acting is so poor? I mean, she is not good, but she is good. Everything that she says or does is said or done with a wrath, a force, a vivacity that makes her smallest gesture and her lightest tone impress themselves upon you. I felt this very strongly two or three times after the play on Friday night, when she was with us. First, when she was alone; when she plays as though we were the gray headed Merlin and she an innocent Vivian weeping helpless spells about him. And then, from this mocking war of words and looks, this gay carriage, this impudent, bold, impudent air, of exasperation or self consciousness, she would pass into a sudden outburst of anger at the impertinence of English rich people, the impertinence of rich millionaires who have made themselves fat on the sweat of other men's evening parties, as they would order their oysters; or the impertinence of those young 'well about town' who thinks she has nothing to do behind the scenes, but receive his visits and provide him with entertainment. And, as the quick, impetuous words came rushing out of her, I could see that she was speaking her best mind to you, and that with a flashing eye and curving lip, an inborn grace and energy which made every word memorable. If she would but look like or speak like that on the stage! But there, of course, is the whole world of difficulty of art comes in, when living, your power to say, to speak, and finding it again transformed. And it is a difficulty which Miss Bretherton has never even understood.

"After the impression of spontaneity and naturalness which I have just described, the physical effect London has already exercised upon her in six weeks. She looks superbly sound and healthy; she is tall and fully developed, and her color, for all its delicacy, is pure and glowing. But, after all, she was born in a languid, tropical climate, and she has been here, in the heat of a ceaseless occupation of London which seem to be telling upon her. She gave me two or three times a painful impression of fatigue on Friday—fatigue and something like depression. After twenty minutes talk, she threw herself back in her chair, her head in her hands, her White Lady's head framing a face so pale and drooping that we all got up to go, feeling that it was cruelty to keep her up a minute longer. 'Mrs. Stuart asked her about Sunday,' she said, 'and whether she ever got out of town, or, if she did, whether she had a lunch. I never knew her more ill, nor, in my biographies, mostly imaginary, illustrated by sketches, made in the intervals of eating, of the sitters whose portraits he has consented to take this year. They range from a bishop and a royalty down to a girl picked up in a cabaret, and the drawings are Balaam's asses. Petrie's knights or Caldever's ladies, all fair the same. You could not say it was a picture, it was simply the bare truth of things put in the whimsical manner which is natural to Forbes. Forbes, however, has been engaged at all, finding her way through the streets, unfamiliar names and allusions with a woman's cleverness, looking adoring all the time in a cloak of brown velvet stuff, and a large hat also of brown velvet. She has a most delicate, pale, delicate, not very sickly skin, but full of charm, and was pleasant to watch it playing with her branches, or smoothing back every now and then the rebellious locks which will stray, do what we will, beyond the boundaries assigned to them. She is a true child, and I have liked the best at the Private View; she repelled by picking out a ball room scene as Forbes's and an unutterable mawkishness of Halford's—a troubadour in a pink dressing

"Probably for the first Sunday—we shall go to Surrey. You remember Hugh Farnham's property near Leigh Hill? I know all the farms about them from old shooting days, and there is one on the edge of the park, a compound which would be perfect for 'May Sunday.' I have written to you a full account of our day. The only rule laid down by the league is that things are to be so managed that Miss Bretherton is to have no possible excuse for fatigue so long as she is in the hands of the society.

"Ten days later Kendal spent a long Monday evening in writing the following letter to his sister:

"Our yesterday's expedition was, I think, a great success. Mrs. Stuart was happy, because she had for once induced Stuart to put away his papers and allow himself a holiday; it was Miss Bretherton's first sight of the genuine English country, and she was delighted and surprised at the reported beauty of the lawns, while Wallace and I amused our many wives extremely well in befriending the most beautiful woman in the British Isles, in drawing her out and watching her strong naive impressions of things. Stuart, I think, was not quite happy. It is hardly to be expected that he would be, when he has to bear the brunt of it, if really gives you pleasure—I dare say there is; we're so confoundedly pleased in the way we look at things. If either of them had a particle of drawing or a scrap of taste, if both of them weren't as bare as a broomstick, I might consider it a gift of any amount of knowledge, there must be a great change in my eyes, for he evidently felt himself in some little difficulty."

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